

The Role of Short-term Academic Mobility Programs of NArFU (Arkhangelsk) in Developing Multilingual and Multicultural Awareness

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Abstract. *The article discusses experience of the Northern (Arctic) Federal University related to planning and organization of short-term student mobility programs – seasonal schools of the Russian language and culture within the broader context of internationalization efforts of the Russian system of higher education. Positive outcomes of such experience are highlighted, such as positive country stereotype modification, perfecting and broadening of knowledge related to the country and its language. Survey results are analyzed to illustrate the effectiveness of short-term language schools.*

Keywords – *Northern (Arctic) Federal University, language schools, student mobility, internationalization, nationality stereotypes*.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2003 the Russian Federation signed the Bologna Declaration which has as its purpose creation of single European academic and educational space. The transition to the two-level education system according to the Bologna process presumes a high level of international academic cooperation. One of the principle criteria of its development is the indices of incoming and outgoing academic mobility of an educational institution. Consequently the parameters of international activity in general and academic mobility in particular play a key role in evaluation of a university's efficiency in global academic space.

Considering the importance of internationalization for Russian higher educational establishments we cannot but mention one of the most effective instruments of it – organization of short-term academic mobility programs by various departments and institutions of our universities. One of the popular models for such programs is short-term (seasonal) language and culture schools as soon as foreign language education is one of the most evident academic spheres to facilitate internationalization.

The purpose of this research is to further investigate the effect of cultural immersion provided by NArFU short-term schools and to trace their role in shaping the mental image of the host country and its people. In this

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view within the framework of the study it is considered important to carry out qualitative and quantitative analysis of parameters characterizing the degree of cultural awareness, immersion and appreciation of the local academic and social environment by foreign participants as these aspects are of utmost importance for creating a general favorable impression and vision of the country as a whole, its people and educational system.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Russian Federation higher education development strategy is currently aimed at increasing its potential through internationalization. In order to stimulate academic mobility a priority project “Developing Export Potential of The Russian Education Export” was launched by the government on the 30th of May, 2017. The purpose of the project is to increase the number of foreign students participating in Russian educational programs. One of its aspects is development of short-term summer language programs [4].

The national strategy supporting the Russian language worldwide is stipulated by the following legal acts of the Russian Federation:

- Russian language and education promotion program adopted by the Council for Russian language of the Government of the Russian Federation in 2013;

- executive order No 2283 dated November, 3rd, 2015 on “Conception of State Support and Promotion of the Russian Language Abroad” for the period of 2016-2020 approved by the President [3].

Organization of short-term language schools is considered common practice by universities and colleges in many countries including states of the former Soviet Union. Short-term language courses are being opened worldwide to stimulate language learning and to develop language proficiency; the university level students believe that participation in academic mobility programs, realized via short-term courses, changes their attitude towards the target foreign language and culture from neutral to more positive [2].

Factors that motivate foreign students to choose Russian language and short-term study programs in our country are varied. Thus, I. Garmashova points out that motives for studying foreign languages are of a dynamic

nature, depending on social factors typical of a specific period of history as well as individual needs [1]. Yu. Romanov and T. Snegurova note that a considerable role here is played by a significant enhancement of the intercultural competence [5].

The Northern (Arctic) Federal University (NArFU) in Arkhangelsk offers foreign students a number of such events which represent a convenient blending of academic component and culture program reflecting unique regional coloring. This research deals with particular student mobility strategies and analyzes academic mobility potential of short-term schools of NArFU.

The first to appear was the Summer School of the Russian Language and Culture which started in 2009 as a result of our cooperation with the University of Upper Alsace in France. It started with just three participants as an exclusive opportunity for French students, but later the school program evolved and the scope and number of its participants became much greater. The program became annual and has been running for 11 years already. The school is a 2-week intensive “crash course” with 60 hours of in-class language teaching and a broad extramural culture program. The school is open for participants with any level of Russian language proficiency, also there are no age or nationality restrictions. The academic component of the program consists of the practical (language) module and theoretical (lecture) module with the content of the latter depending on students’ preferences. For instance it may include classes on economy and business in the Russian North or politics and history of the North of Russia. Students’ immersion into the cultural and language environment is provided by way of an intense program of cultural events (field classes, open-air lectures, walking tours, master-classes and etc.).

The success and popularity of the Summer School with NArFU international students has to account for further attempts on our behalf to develop and improve this format. Thus, in 2014, in cooperation with the Center of Russian science and culture in Berlin, we introduced the Autumn School of the Russian Language with initial focus on German students and in February 2019 we started the Winter School. Although the duration of all schools is comparatively the same, different topical foci makes each of them special.

III. METHOD

The method adopted for the study was survey research conducted using specially developed students’ feedback questionnaires. For the purpose of the study we used two types of questionnaires – Entrance survey form (ESF) and Graduation survey form (GSF) with the former offered to students at the beginning of the course and the latter – upon completing the school program. Both questionnaires served not only to reveal language proficiency level (which was crucial for initial group composition and results’ monitoring), but also offered a set of quantitative and qualitative evaluation parameters characterizing students’ past experience of dealing with Russia and Russian people and their vision of the local environment. Many of the ESF and GSF questions were aimed at registering the same parameters in order to trace change

dynamics of the students’ attitude to the Region, the country and its people as a result of their 2-week school experience.

The questionnaires included a set of general personal data fields to complete (age, sex, country of origin, number of previous visits to Russia) and a series of questions challenging participants to evaluate individual items depending on their knowledge/personal preferences/probability/etc. Depending on the type of question the evaluation scale ranges from 0-5 to 0-10.

For instance:

Please, evaluate your knowledge of the following aspects of life in the North of Russia (0 to 10):

Traditions and customs - ...

Geography - ...

National character - ...

Transport and infrastructure - ...

History - ...

Weather and climate - ...

Etc.

Please, state your expectations from your current visit to Russia - for ESF questionnaire, with GSF questionnaire the task was to state the degree to which this or that statement (expectation) was justified (from 0 to 10).

Please, state your level of content with the following aspects of every-day life in Arkhangelsk (0 to 5):

Attitude of local people towards you - ...

Weather conditions - ...

Level of security - ...

Comfort of accommodation and pastime - ...

Quality of service in shops and organizations - ...

Availability of food products and basic consumer goods - ...

Access to information sources and media quality - ...

Etc.

Please evaluate correctness of the following stereotypes about Russia (0 to 10):

Negligible treatment of ecological issues - ...

Alcohol abuse - ...

Russians have a distrust in the law - ...

Love for luxury and smart outlook - ...

Russians are gloomy, reserved and smile seldom - ...

Poor quality of roads - ...

Cold weather - ...

Russians are very politicized - ...

Etc.

The resulting score for each item was defined as arithmetic mean value (points corresponding to each item throughout the whole bulk of forms were summed up and divided by the number of respondents). This principle was used to calculate mean values for items in both ESF and GSF surveys. Afterwards a comparative analysis of values was carried out revealing the differences in score which serve to indicate the role of short-term language schools in shaping students’ attitude and vision of the local environment, Russian people and the country as a whole.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey data concerning students’ feedback was provided for every short-term language school organized

by NArFU Higher School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International Communication during the period from 2015 to 2019. The overall number of schools' participants within this period is 151 persons out of which 69 persons visited Russia for the first time for the NArFU language school. Their distribution according to age and country of origin is given in Fig. 1-2.

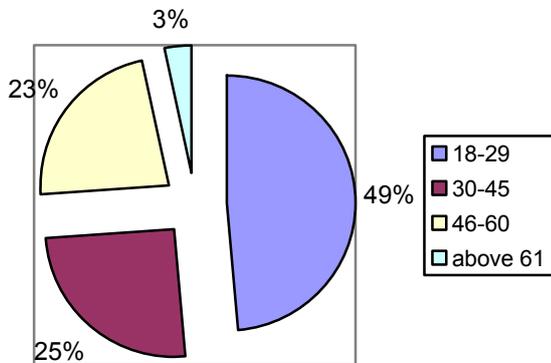


Fig. 1. Age distribution of the participants

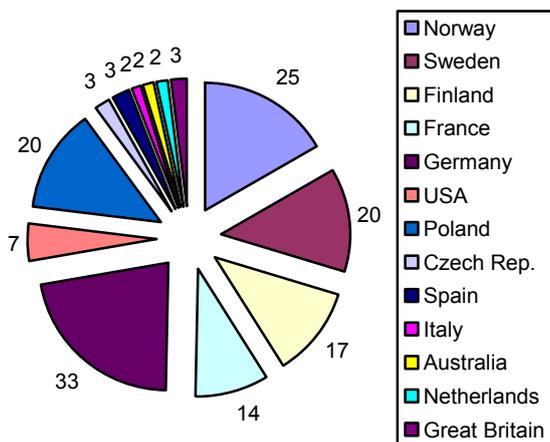


Fig. 2. Participants' distribution acc. to country of origin

In order to monitor possible changes of the participants' attitude and perception of the new cultural and social environment during their stay in Arkhangelsk the research team had to get the initial picture of their perception of the country and region. For this purpose on the first day of the program students were asked to fill in the ESF containing questions regarding general knowledge about Russia (including nationality stereotypes) and their expectations from the course. On this stage of most importance was the data presented by the people visiting Russia for the first time as their perception and vision of the country's realities was purely hypothetical. It was shaped by factors like mass media, literature, experience of others, possible occasional interactions with Russian citizens abroad, etc. In this respect evaluations given by the group of 69 first-time visitors are the most representative in terms of constructing the general picture of contemporary stereotypical model of Russia as it bears no corrective influence of personal visits. But as soon as the purpose of this research is to trace the particular role of NArFU short-term language schools in shaping the mental image

of the country and the region, we did not make special distinction between respondents according to the number of their visits to Russia.

When filling in the ESF questionnaire participants had to assess their knowledge of different aspects of life in the Russian North (e. g. history, geography, traditions, national character, social and political conditions, infrastructure, aspects of cultural life and etc.) grading their level of awareness from 0 (nil) to 10 (excellent) points. As a result arithmetic mean values were calculated indicating the degree of familiarization with Russian realities. Distribution of points in this first section of the questionnaire revealed that foreign visitors were least familiar with such aspects of life in the North of Russia as local infrastructure, educational and social establishments (the mean value here was 0,8 points), history, geography and local industries (1,7 points), local culture and national character (2,5 points). At the same time participants' initial awareness turned out to be higher in such aspects as social and political environment (3,2) traditions and customs (3,5) and cuisine (3,3). The highest number of awareness points (4,7) was attributed to weather and climate. Such results can be partially explained by the nature and structure of stereotypes about Russia which tend to focus on routine daily life aspects like weather and cuisine. The level of Russian political environment awareness can be explained by the influence of media.

The GSF survey conducted after the two-week school program demonstrated considerable changes in students' degree of familiarization with Russian realities (Table 1).

TABLE 1. DEGREES OF FAMILIARIZATION: ESF AND GSF SURVEY RESULTS COMPARED

Parameter	ESF result	GSF result	Change
Traditions and customs	3,5	6,5	+3
Geography	1,7	3,4	+1,7
National character	2,5	3,8	+1,3
Local infrastructure	0,8	3,1	+3,02
History	1,7	4,1	+2,4
Weather and climate	4,7	5,2	+0,5
Social and political environment	3,2	4,3	+1,1
Educational and social establishments	0,8	3,3	+2,5
Local science and industries	1,65	2,4	+0,75
Fine arts	2,5	4,7	+2,2
Music	2	4,1	+2,1
Architecture	2	5,5	+3,5
Local accommodation and pastimes	0,9	5,2	+5,1
National cuisine	3,3	7,3	+4

Thus the final value of most parameters demonstrated an increase by 2-4 points which indicates a considerable growth of awareness level according to the results of the self-assessment. It is notable that the highest rate of growth was demonstrated by such items as "local accommodation and pastimes", "cuisine", "history" and "traditions and customs" while the number of points for "national character", "weather and climate", "social and

political environment” changed insignificantly. This can be explained on the one hand – by the curriculum of the schools’ academic and culture programs which focuses on historical and cultural issues and on the other – by a more complex nature of notions like “national character” and “political environment” which take much more time to penetrate.

The next section of questionnaires helped to establish correlation between students’ expectancies and actual results of their experience in Arkhangelsk. While filling in the ESF students were asked to state their main expectations from the program in Arkhangelsk. Analysis of forms revealed the following list of items shared by the majority: new experiences, acquaintances and communication (98%), museums and places of interest (81%), hospitality (72%), intense study program (68%), nice weather (51%), unique atmosphere of the Russian North (32%), cafes and restaurants (17%). This distribution supports the idea of “educational tourism” as one of the most effective mechanisms of implementation for the concept of life-long learning as purely educational goals turn out to take second places next to discovering the world and enriching yourself with new experiences.

Concerning the students’ anticipations, the GSF survey offered them to state the degree of justification for each of the parameters they put forward in ESF (with points from 0 – “absolutely unjustified” to 10 – “absolutely justified”). Thus, the final survey indicated that the student’s expectations expressed in ESF forms were satisfied to 90-100% (9-10 points of the arithmetic mean) for most of the aforementioned items, exceptions being the weather (7,5 points), restaurants, cafes and pastimes (8 points). The results illustrate a high level of justification for participants’ chief expectations, the fact that serves a good contribution to the general image of local social and academic environment and indicates effectiveness and purposefulness of the NArFU schools.

The final section of the ESF questionnaire served to reveal students’ attitude to Russian nationality stereotypes and to trace possible changes of this attitude as a result of participation in NArFU short-term language schools. For this purpose participants were offered to express their agreement or disagreement with the stereotypes about our country and its people most commonly encountered in the media. The degree of approval for each stereotype ranged from 0 (“absolutely wrong”) to 10 (“absolutely right”). In order to state degree of approval arithmetic mean value was calculated. According to the results of the initial survey the highest degree of approval was characteristic for the following stereotypes: Russians are gloomy, reserved, distrustful and smile seldom (7,5 points), people here appreciate luxury and smart outlook (7,1 points), Russians often abuse alcohol (6,8), Russians are very politicized (6,4), in Russia the weather is always cold (5,8), Russian police is always suspicious to foreigners (5,7), Russians have a distrust in the law (5,2). At the same time other popular stereotypes enjoyed much weaker support of our foreign guests: Russians smoke a lot (3,4), there’s a high level of corruption in Russia (3,3), the roads in Russia are in a bad state (3,1), Russians are arrogant

towards Western people (1,3), Russians are superstitious (1,1).

Although nationality stereotypes’ analysis is outside the scope of the present research and it was not on the list of our goals to approve or disapprove of popular conceptual representations of a nation, we consider it possible to use those representations existing in public consciousness as a reference point for creation of a decent picture shaped more by instances of personal experience than by stereotypical images. In order to state the degree to which our students’ two-week experience managed to modify their stereotypes about Russia and Russian people at the end of the school program we offered them once again to evaluate statements containing some widely-spread ideas about our country and region. Results revealed during the analysis of completed GSF forms (Table 2) indicate that images shaped by personal experience do not substitute stereotypical ideas but rather modify them serving as an important practical complement.

TABLE 2. RUSSIAN NATIONALITY STEREOTYPES: ESF AND GSF SURVEY RESULTS COMPARED

Stereotype	ESF result	GSF result	Change
Russians often abuse alcohol	6,8	5,3	-1,5
Russians have a distrust in the law	5,2	4,8	-0,4
Love for luxury and smart outlook	7,1	6,3	-0,8
Russians are gloomy, reserved, distrustful and smile seldom	7,5	3,4	-4,1
Poor quality of roads	3,1	4,1	+1
The weather here is always cold	5,8	3,5	-2,3
Russians are very politicized	6,4	7,5	+1,1
Arrogance towards Western people	1,3	0,8	-0,5
Russians are superstitious	1,1	1,5	+0,4
High level of corruption in Russia	3,3	3,1	-0,2
Russian police is always suspicious to foreigners	5,7	3,4	-2,3
Russians smoke a lot	3,4	1,3	-2,1

Thus, analysis of the difference between the two arithmetic mean values (ESF and GSF) indicates that the change rate with different stereotypes ranges from rather small amounts (0,2 – 0,4 points) to quite considerable ones (2-4 points). Moreover, the change value can be positive or negative which means that practical experience served to correct and “fine-tune” existing stereotypical representations either supporting person’s expectations or contradicting them. According to the data obtained the change rate seldom exceeds $\pm 2-4$ points which confirms comparative rigidity and stability of stereotypes as landmark mental representations. Of particular interest is the nature and character of those changes. Driven by instances of personal experience they reflect actual

realities of physical and psychological environment registering its most notable features and adding them to a persons' vision the world around. As can be viewed from the results the general stereotypical picture of foreign students visiting NArFU short-term language and culture schools in Arkhangelsk undergoes certain changes. Thus, for instance, after 2 weeks in Russia they tend to disapprove of certain negative stereotypical characteristics of our country deeply rooted in foreign mass consciousness such as massive alcohol abuse and abundant smoking, gloomy, distrustful and arrogant character of Russian people and total control of interior security services over all foreigners. This being said, for the sake of objectivity we do need to point out that certain unflattering stereotypes found their justification through our participants' experience in Arkhangelsk, e. g. the unsatisfactory quality of the city roads. As for the statements declaring the superstitious and politicized character of our psychology, although they found certain evidences throughout actual experiences of our foreign guests, they cannot be explicitly referred to either positive or negative and hardly ever cause discomfort to foreigners.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The survey findings indicate practical value and purposefulness of short-term language and culture schools for foreign students on the premises of NArFU in terms of internationalization development and establishing interpersonal academic and social contacts. Statistical parameter values registered in the course of the research although being the result of subjective self-evaluation by the participants, illustrate general tendencies of positive country stereotype modification (by 2 to 30% average), perfecting and broadening of knowledge related to the country and the region (by 10 to 40%) and almost 100% justification of our guests' favorable expectations. The

results obtained serve to state the “win-win” effect of such schools both for the host country and our foreign guests consisting in mutual cultural, academic and social exchange and enrichment.

To conclude, we hope that we have been able to make a contribution to further discussion of multicultural and multilingual awareness as an indispensable element of education in Russia.

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